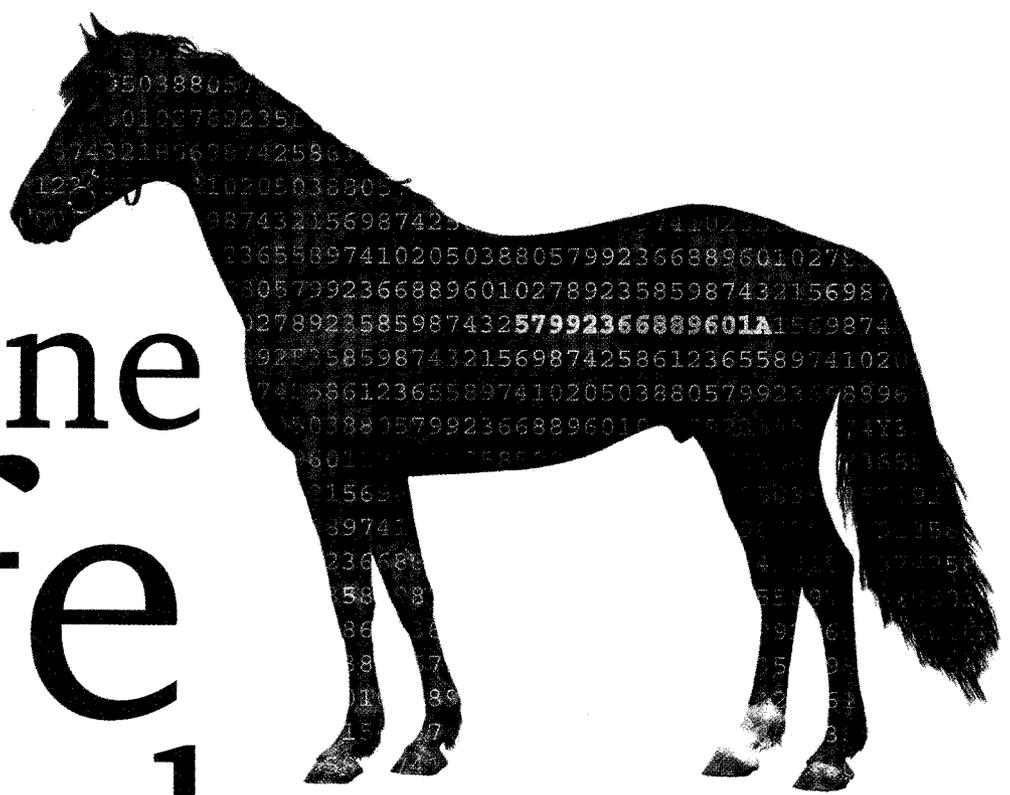


# Equine Life Numbers



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Assigning an Universal Equine Life Number is an internationally-accepted method for identifying and tracking a horse. It is a 15-digit alphanumeric code that is unique to every horse in the world.

A universal traceability system for horses in Canada is necessary – and inevitable

by Liz Brown

**T**he world is shrinking. Globalization has seen Starbucks popping up from Seattle to Moscow to Shanghai. When you can be sure a chipper barista clad in a green apron will whip up your latte no matter what corner of the globe you're in, you can't be surprised that there are demands for a more streamlined system of global equine trade.

With ever-increasing numbers of horses crossing borders for breeding, performance and even consumption, there has been increased demand for a method to identify each individual equine. Since 2009, the European Union (EU) has implemented regulations that require horses moving within the region to meet strict identification requirements. One of these requirements is that the horse in question possesses a Universal Equine Life Number, or UELN.

## What is a Life Number?

The UELN is the internationally-accepted method for identifying a horse – a 15-digit alphanumeric code that is unique to every horse in the world. There is a specific system for assigning a horse this code. The first three digits are the number of the country where the database that registered a foal is located. In the case of Canada, that number is 124.

The second three digits are the code of the registry database. For example, the Canadian Sport Horse code is 002. The remaining digits are the numbers assigned by the registering body.

Currently, live horses that are imported to the EU must be in possession of a UELN. While this number is easily obtainable by anyone interested in exporting a horse to Europe, of greater pragmatic concern (for some) is the fact that any horse meat imported to Europe must show a record of lifetime traceability by the summer of 2013, as outlined by the EU in food safety documents.

Eventually, in all facets of the horse industry – even within our borders – horses will be required to carry a record of information that includes their farm of residence, the places they have travelled (ex. competition venues, racetracks) and the drugs and veterinary treatments they have received. There are many purposes for such a traceability system – to ensure biosecurity (the prevention of infectious disease transmission), for emergency management (ex. identifying horses that may be separated from their owners in the event of a natural disaster), for food safety (for those horses destined for slaughter), and to track pedigree and performance information to increase a horse's value.

## Traceability and What it Means in Canada

For 10 years, Equine Canada has been in talks to develop a national system that would track horses for the purposes mentioned above. The program is called CanEquid – Canada's National Equine Identification and Traceability Program.

Dr. Edward Kendall, former chair of Equine Canada's Equine ID Committee said that Equine Canada has been in talks with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and Agriculture Canada about traceability. "Through our industry forums and town hall meetings, we learned that the horse industry was interested in (traceability) regulations if, and only if, there would be financial support for infrastructure to support those regulations."

So far, that financial support from the government hasn't been forthcoming; however, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada did approve funding up to \$478,766 to Equine Canada to do preliminary research on developing a system.

Right now, Equine Canada's plan for implementation of a traceability system using UELNs will be based on the practices of business, according to Dr. Kendall. "We have communicated to the federal government that given the fact that the equine industry is expected to mount the traceability initiative by itself, the industry will plan a phased-in voluntary approach."

A tracking program that includes the UELN and eventually possibly microchips would provide reliable food safety checks.

To this end, Equine Canada will first target horses that frequently move from location to location, such as show horses, race horses and breeding stock. "We intend to strengthen our normal business practices requiring things such as standardized identification and reporting of critical moves to participate in a whole variety of things," said Dr. Kendall. He added that Equine Canada intends to work with the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association to encourage them to accept this standardized identification and the UELN as the identifier for the animal.

Right now, according to Dr. Kendall, the breed registries and associations in Canada are aware of the shift towards this new practice of identifying horses and they are willing to make minor changes to their practices to accommodate this new system. For example, this might require the registries to collect a nominal fee at the time a foal is registered which would help fund a national database that will use the UELN as its method for tracking. And, as of January 2013, Equine Canada requires owners applying for an FEI passport for their horses to have the animal microchipped.

## Benefits and Barriers

There are a multitude of benefits to a national traceability system for equines in Canada. Two of the most apparent for many horse owners is the ability to have a central database to track breeding and performance records. "The advantage for breeders is that if the UELN is incorporated in rules of business, they can better follow the progeny of their animals, even in disparate disciplines," said Dr. Kendall. The ability for breeders to have cost-effective data can only help their programs. Within

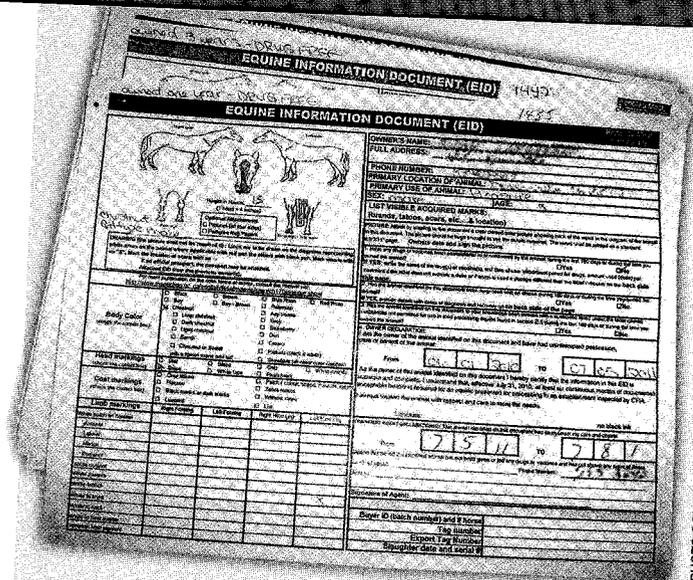


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CANADIAN HORSE DEFENCE COALITION

## Why Equine Information Documents are not Enough

As of July 2010, in Canada, all slaughter-bound horses must be accompanied by an Equine Information Document (EID), which includes information on the horse, its six-month medical history and a signed owner declaration stating the information is accurate and complete.

The accuracy and reliability of the documents has often been called into question, however, given that the identification of horses in the slaughter pipeline is largely based on the honour system, with the plants not questioning sellers' documents and only random and infrequent testing by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

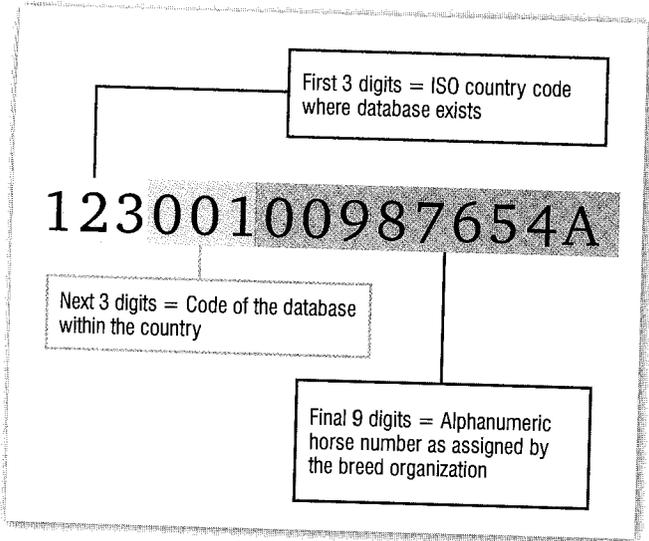
One such example came to light in an investigative report by the *Toronto Star*, published at the end of March. It exposed the shady dealings of the slaughter industry by sharing the story of Backstreet Bully, whose life came to a regretful end this January.

As reported by the *Star*, the ex-racehorse, formerly owned by racing magnate Frank Stronach, was retired after only three races in 2008, then entered Stronach's Thoroughbred retirement program. He was matched up with a new owner, who used him for lessons, then gave him to a student, where he lived for three years. During his racing career and afterwards, Backstreet Bully's medical history shows that he received numerous drugs, including phenylbutazone and nitrofurazone, both known carcinogens in humans. But, when the gelding was sold in January, to a man who immediately sent him to auction, his EID did not reflect this. Thus, when he was purchased by a "kill buyer" and shipped for slaughter in Quebec, no one was supposed to be the wiser.

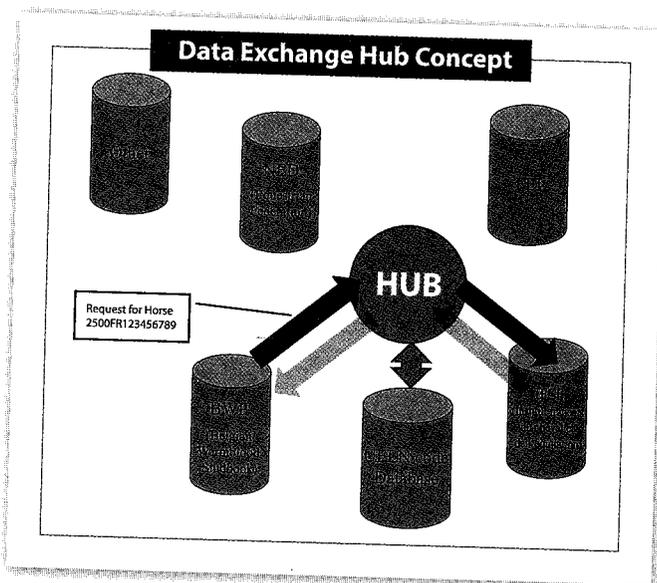
As the *Star's* investigation revealed, however, Backstreet Bully's identity was uncovered by an auction attendee, who read his racing name off his halter, and called to alert the Stronach farm. It is reported that an employee of the farm frantically called the slaughter house to inform them of his medical history, in the hopes of granting him a reprieve, but to no avail. Backstreet Bully died in that slaughter house, and neither the slaughter house, nor the CFIA will say whether his meat was sold for human consumption or not.

~ Amy Harris

**Example of a UELN:**



It is important to note that the UELN used alone is not enough to identify a horse. The UELN is the link between the passport and the database where the horse has been registered at birth, but it is still very important to create a link between the horse and the passport (such as a microchip) to complete the chain of information.



The principle involves communication between two databases through a hub (on the UELN database server). No data is stored in the hub, which counts the access requests (logs). The central UELN database holds and maintains all access rights and grants and the available web services list. A portal window will be created to this central hub for each database, which will then allow them to grant access rights to specific web services to other specified databases.

(From UELN presentation at Equitana Melbourne, Nov. 16th, 2012)

a program, identifying mares that throw better dressage horses than hunters, or better reiners than roping horses, is in line with modern management practices and might facilitate new entries to the breeding business.

If horse movement is tracked, in the event of an outbreak of disease, authorities would know exactly what farms and animals to quarantine, allowing unaffected locations and animals to continue business as usual.

And, for those involved in the horse slaughter industry, a tracking program that includes the UELN and eventually possibly microchips would provide reliable food safety checks – something that will have to be met to come in line with new EU regulations for meat imports that are coming into effect in July 2013.

While those who deal in the business of live horses for the most part support a gradual phasing-in of a national traceability system, there is a push from the slaughter industry to get a workable system in place by the deadline this summer.

This has created some friction in the equine community and at national traceability meetings. In September last year, Bill DesBarres, president of the Horse Welfare Alliance of Canada (HWAC), an organization with ties to the slaughter industry, issued a ‘call to action’ letter to people in the equine world, mentioning HWAC’s plan, called Equine Traceability Canada, which would provide an online

database through a company called Animal ID Solutions.

Lantz McLaren, co-founder and president of Animal ID Solutions, stresses that although food safety is an integral part of their proposal, it is not the sole motivation. According to McLaren, Animal ID Solutions presented their suite of database software to Equine Canada five years ago, but Equine Canada was reticent to adopt it. “At that time, Equine Canada felt that they had a better solution of their own,” said McLaren.

“To date, Equine Canada has never been able to test nor present a functioning product. They have an exemplary plan; they do not have any tangible software or a functioning database,” he added.

McLaren said that to register horses in the ETC database, owners would have to pay a fee, which, like the Equine Canada plan, would be tacked onto breed registration fees. But when it comes to hard numbers, McLaren isn’t clear on what the actual cost to owners would be, citing an estimate of an initial \$20 registration fee. Beyond that, if owners had to update information and track movements and veterinary treatments, there could be further costs.

This is where Dr. Kendall has concerns. He said that Equine Canada has looked at half a dozen software suites that would act as traceability databases and believes that the software isn’t the issue – it is the ability of the equine industry, which is already

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suffering setbacks because of the stagnant economy and sweeping changes in the racing industry – to pay for such a program. “Equine Canada is offering to phase in an affordable cost-shared system,” he said.

But McLaren doesn't believe it's just a cost issue. He said there are politics at play, but “doesn't want to point fingers.” And, in a public email exchange, Dr. Kendall did admit that Equine Canada had problems with a database system that charged all horse owners, but was being implemented – for the most part – to serve the interests of the slaughter industry. In speaking with McLaren, it's clear that his greatest concern is the EU's looming deadline. “The EU has a very intelligent and affluent buyer (for horse meat) and they want assurances in regards to their product,” he said.

“The deadline (July 2013) was created in an exchange between the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and SANGO [the EU's version of the CFIA]. The CFIA created this crisis for the horse meat exporters by not coming to grips with food safety involving horses,” said Dr. Kendall.

In an email from March 27th, a CFIA spokesperson said that Canada has not been “formally advised through the WTO/OIE (the World Trade Organization and the World Organization for Animal Health) of a summer 2013 deadline from the EU for further traceability of horses,”

so it would seem that the horse meat industry – for now – will continue as usual. For DesBarres, this is small comfort. “The scary thing is, the EU can close their borders at any time,” he said.

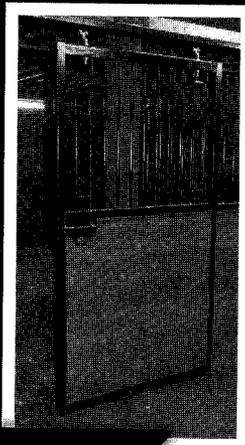
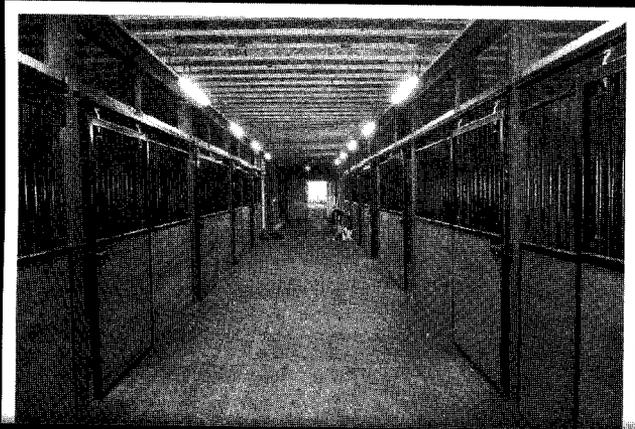
For now, stakeholders in the equine industry continue to meet and discuss the best ways to implement a traceability system and the industry still seems fractured in how to proceed. Equine Canada is poised to apply for further funding in developing this system through the Growing Forward II AgriMarketing Program for the period of 2013 through to 2018. Through this program, EC hopes to secure funds to fast track the implementation of a national equine traceability system, enhance disease surveillance for horses in Canada and develop quality assurance programs for horses sold in Canada.

If it seems that the implementation of a national traceability system for equines is moving at a glacial – and quite complicated – pace, it's because of the logistical and financial hurdles that such a complex system involves. But, like the ubiquitous Starbucks lattes, it seems inevitable that the UELN will become part of the horse owner's globalized world. 🐾

(Ed. Note: for more information about the UELN, visit [www.ueln.net](http://www.ueln.net))

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